Talking about diets

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Clinical question
Is there a specific diet I should recommend for my patients?

Recommendations

- While low-carbohydrate diets have shown greater efficacy in the short term, in the longer term most diets that reduce caloric intake are equally effective.
- The best diet for your patients is one that is sustainable and best matches their lifestyle and food preferences.
- For patients choosing to follow a low-carb diet, replacing processed carbohydrates with "healthy" fats may help with weight loss and diabetes control, and is likely "heart healthy."
- The long-term effects of high saturated fat intake remain unknown and patients should be counselled to avoid trans-fats.
- The Mediterranean diet is supported by strong evidence for cardiovascular and overall health benefit.

How could this change my practice?

Understanding the pros and cons of common diet plans will help you counsel patients on a topic that does not have a clear evidence base.

Reviewing the benefits as well as the "unknowns" will help patients choose the diet plan that best suits their lifestyle and preferences, and will ensure that they understand potential safety issues.

Encouraging patients to choose a diet plan that is sustainable is most important, as the only effective diet is one that they can stick to.

Why did we choose this topic?

- Each year, 45 million Americans go on a diet, but about 30 million go on to regain more weight than they lost!
- Patients are increasingly inquiring about various "fad diets" such as the ketogenic diet (very low-carb diet) and intermittent fasting.

Evidence summary

How well a patient can stick to a diet (sustainability) is likely the most important contributor to successful weight loss and improved quality of life. Short- to medium-term studies of high-fat, low-carb diets show initial benefit for weight loss and improvement in glycemic control for diabetes. Longer-term data show similar efficacy to other diets that restrict calories. [1–3]

Recommending higher fat intake at the expense of carbohydrates is likely safe and beneficial for cardiovascular health and glycemic control, if the fat intake is primarily in the form of unsaturated fats. [4]
Intermittent fasting works better than no diet at all, based on small, short-term studies. Comparative effectiveness of this diet versus other diets is unknown. [5]

The Mediterranean diet, which includes plenty of healthy fats and high-quality, unprocessed carbohydrates, has been shown to lower stroke, MI, and premature death as well as to improve a patient's sense of well-being! [6]

**Resource**

**Handout:** The Mediterranean Diet

**References**


